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Washington Report
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THE THREAT OF CENSORSHIP

Not since the 1950's has our First Amendment freedom of expression been so endangered. All over the country a wide variety of groups are seeking to outlaw certain school texts, to pull from libraries a wide range of both fiction and non-fiction, and to drive off the TV screens some of the countries most popular programs.

The greatest threat, by far, comes from the far right. The Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and a number of organizations similar to his are especially active in the conservative Bible Belt areas of the South and Midwest. The California Moral Majority is also active in "monitoring" school texts and library books.

Let there be no misunderstanding. The "book burners" are not restricting themselves to hardcore or softcore pornography. Rather, they are attacking respected books by well known authors. Some of the most frequently attacked works are J.D. Salinger's classic, CATCHER IN THE RYE, Aldous Huxley's BRAVE NEW WORLD, John Howard Griffin's BLACK LIKE ME, Harper Lee's TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD -- from which the award winning movie by the same name was made, and -- incredible as it may seem -- THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK, the world's best known Holocaust memoir.

Unfortunately, the self-appointed censors do not always restrict themselves to lobbying for the removal of books. In Montello, Wisconsin, the "Concerned Citizens" organization has been checking out all the books they find objectionable, and replacing them with Bible tracts. The books are not returned until the organization has scrutinized them and focused public attention on their alleged faults.

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THE THREAT OF CENSORSHIP
by HENRY A. WAXMAN, 24th C.D.
June 10, 1981
Page Two.

The censors are not only violating other people's constitutional rights, they are also crippling school systems in many states. More than half a century after the Scopes trials we find school districts all over the country in which the teaching of evolution must conform to the demands of fundamentalist religious groups.

Of even greater importance is the success the censors have had in depriving school-age youngsters of even the most rudimentary knowledge of human reproduction. In most schools, what little sex education there is comes so late and is so removed from the practical problems of today's teenagers as to be worthless. In many places the use of even the most scholarly texts in the fields of biology and physiology have been discontinued and replaced with sectarian sanitized pap.

In fairness I must note that the right wing does not have a monopoly on censorship. Some elements in the Jewish community (of which I am an active member) have sought to ban books, plays, or movies in which they feel Jews are negatively depicted. Some have even challenged the right of high school students to read Shakespeare's THE MERCHANT OF VENICE or Charles Dicken's classic OLIVER TWIST. While I can see the validity of their contention that Shylock and Fagin are negative characters, I do not see how this justifies the suppression of major literary works.

I regard myself as one of the strongest congressional supporters of feminist aspirations. Yet, on the issue of censorship, I cannot support some elements within the feminist movement. True, the Hardy Boys series and the parallel Nancy Drew series reflect the most narrow-minded and archaic stereotypes of sex roles. I would sooner have my son read HARRIET THE SPY than the HARDY BOYS, but there is a world of difference between personal choice and the coercion which results from censorship.

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THE THREAT OF CENSORSHIP
by HENRY A. WAXMAN, 24th C.D.
June 10, 1931
Page Three.

In a free society, the banning of a book -- even an insignificant book by an unknown author -- is an act of tremendous importance. For adults, it almost always means the violation of the Constitution. Even children's reading material should be restricted only in the most extreme cases. Certainly, works of acknowledged scholarly or literary significance should never be placed out of the reach of the public just because these works do not conform with the belief of a zealous minority.

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